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# Unravelling topography around subduction zones from laboratory models

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## Abstract

The relief around subduction zones results from the interplay of dynamic processes that may locally exceed the (iso)static contributions. The viscous dissipation of the energy in and around subduction zones is capable of generating kilometer scale vertical movements at the surface. In order to evaluate dynamic topography in a self-consistent subduction system, we carried out a set of laboratory experiments, wherein the lithosphere and mantle are simulated by means of newtonian viscous materials, namely silicone putty and glucose syrup. Models are kept in their most simple form and are made of negative buoyancy plates, of variable width and thickness, freely plunging into the syrup. The surface of the model and the top of the slab are scanned in three dimensions. A forebulge systematically emerges from the bending of the viscous plate, adjacent to the trench. With a large wavelength, dynamic pressure offsets the foreside and backside of the slab by  $\sim 500$  m on average. The suction, that accompanies the vertical descent of the slab depresses the surface on both sides. At a distance equal to the half-width of the slab, the topographic depression amounts to  $\sim 500$  m on average and vanishes at a distance that equals the width of the slab. In order to explore the impact of slab rollback on the topography, the trailing edge of the plates is alternatively fixed to (*fixed* mode) and freed from (*free* mode) the end wall of the tank. Both the pressure and suction components of the topography are  $\sim 30\%$  lower in the *free* mode, indicating that slab rollback

fosters the subsidence of upper plates. Our models are compatible with first order observations of the topography around the East Scotia, Tonga, Kermadec and Banda subduction zones.

*Key words:* subduction, dynamic topography, dynamic pressure, forebulge, analogue modeling

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## 1 Introduction

The topography results from a variety of processes that, around subduction zones more than anywhere else, have strong spatial gradients. At the surface of the Earth, the conjunction of these processes not only produces the most important deviations from the geoid (outlined by the 5-10 km deep trenches), but also the largest topographic slopes, offshore and onshore. The topographic expression of subduction zones is viewed as the juxtaposition of a depressed bathymetry of the overriding plate, a deep trench, an outer rise (or forebulge). This structure correlates well with the gravity signal, in particular long wavelength geoid highs that correspond to the density anomalies of the subducted slabs, overprinted by sharp free air lows over the trenches that highlight the dynamic nature of the topographic depression, and an intermediate scale free air low that highlights the dynamic deflection of the overriding plate [1–5] .

In fact, the processes that generate the total relief can be separated into the static components of the relief, that are primarily due to the lateral density variations within the lithosphere, and the more elusive dynamic topography that is, within its common geophysical sense, the response of the surface to the stresses that arise from the underlying mantle flow [6–9]. The process is presumably rather well known in theory, and a vast amount of work has focussed on explaining a variety of transgressive episodes thanks to models of dynamic topography around subduction zones [10–12,5,13–16]. However, the magnitude and wavelength remains highly uncertain (see e.g. Krien and Fleitout [17]). Indeed, even if many of the cited applications are appealing, Wheeler and White [18] conversely found no significant dynamic topography in South East Asia, where it is presumably represented at best, above the largest concentration of slabs at present-day. Uncertainty persists for several reasons.

First, the observation of the topography of the Earth around subduction zones is blurred by the convolution of complex mechanisms, and therefore requires meticulous analysis of, for instance, the admittance of topography and gravity

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31 signals [19]. But only a clear conception of the structure of the lithosphere  
32 at a global scale, and at a degree that is almost always beyond our current  
33 knowledge, could definitely solve this issue.

34 Second, confusion may arise from the definition of dynamic topography. In  
35 fact, several components of the topography have a dynamic origin, and coining  
36 it to the sole contribution of mantle flow underneath the lithosphere is not only  
37 restrictive but misleading. In particular around subduction zones, a variety of  
38 dynamic processes lead to the formation of, for the most obvious parts, the  
39 forebulge and the trench.

40 Third, a variety of studies have individually explored the different mechanisms,  
41 predicting a plausible relief that integrates all such processes is theoretically  
42 rendered possible thanks to numerical models, even in three dimensions. How-  
43 ever, at this stage, many technical challenges (free surface condition, three-  
44 dimensional aspect) or mechanical issues (one-sided subductions, trench be-  
45 havior, etc...) make numerical simulations around subduction zones neither  
46 definitive nor consensual. In fact, only few attempts were done to capture all  
47 the elements of the topography around subduction zones together [3,4,20,21].

48

49 Analogue models may offer an alternative. In this paper, we thus build upon  
50 classic analogue models of subduction zones [22–24] to unravel the topography  
51 around subduction zones. The following experiments therefore represent a first  
52 attempt to model the topography around subduction zones self-consistently,  
53 *i.e.* by examining the case of *free* subductions, wherein the dynamics is only  
54 driven by the buoyancy of the slab and resisted by the viscous flow in the  
55 surrounding mantle. Such setting is rendered possible thanks to the advantages  
56 of laboratory models.

## 57 **2 The models**

### 58 *2.1 Experimental setup*

59 We carried out a set of 13 experiments that essentially reproduce the lines  
60 of the experiments of [22] or [24] (Supplementary material 1). We use silicone  
61 putty (Rhodrosil Gomme, PDMS + iron fillers) and glucose syrup to model the  
62 lithosphere and the upper mantle, respectively. Silicone putty is a viscoelastic  
63 material but its Maxwell time ( $< 1$  s) precludes any elastic behavior in our  
64 models lasting several minutes. Glucose syrup is a transparent Newtonian low-  
65 viscosity and high-density fluid. These materials have been selected to achieve  
66 the standard scaling procedure for stresses scaled down for length, density and

viscosity in a natural gravity field as described by Weijermars and Schmeling [25] and Davy and Cobbold [26].

The scale factor for length is  $1.5 \times 10^{-7}$  (1 cm in the experiment corresponds to 66 km in nature) (Table 1). Densities and viscosities are assumed to be uniform over the thickness of the individual layers and are considered to be averages of the actual values. For the reference model, described hereafter, the negative buoyancy of the lithosphere is  $-91 \text{ kg/m}^3$  (Table 1). The viscosity ratio between the slab and the surrounding mantle ( $\eta_l/\eta_m$ ) is  $1.4 \times 10^4$ . This value appears to be an upper bound according to recent studies [21,27–30].

## 2.2 Experimental procedure

The system is disposed in a 80 cm wide square tank (fig. 1). The experimental subduction is always initiated by artificially forcing the leading edge of the silicone plate into the glucose downward to a depth of 3 cm (corresponding to about 200 km in nature). We complemented the standard setup [22] by adding a laser scan (**put the reference of the old laser? I don't have them**) above the tank and digitize the deforming topography. The laser is capable of acquiring the topography with a maximum horizontal resolution of 0.13 mm. The precision of punctual topographic data is 0.05 mm (**this is for new laser**), which considerably improves when a statistical treatment is applied. In the following, we refer to the side of the unsubducted portions of the plate as the foreside and conversely, the backside is the region above the sunken slab (fig. 1).

For modeling conveniency, each experiment is separated into two sub-experiments. The first stage of the experiments takes place within the framework of *fixed edge* subduction *sensu* Kincaid and Olson [31], *i.e.* the trailing edge of the slab is attached to the tank in order to preclude any trenchward motion of the silicone plate. When steady state is reached (when the generic *S* shape of the retreating slab is reached and the geometry remains unchanged in the referential of the moving trench), the shape of the silicone slab is scanned before the surface is spray-painted (in order to overcome optical issues due to the translucency of the glucose syrup) and scanned as well. When all measurements are done, the trailing edge of the silicone slab is freed from the tank, and the subduction enters a *free edge* mode for a second sub-experiment. Because the surface remains painted from the first stage, it is technically impossible to scan the surface of the slab at depth without strongly damaging the experiment. Only the topography of the surface of the model is thus acquired when a new steady state is reached.

Our simplified subduction system is designed in order to impose a straightforward force balance that approximately reproduces that of plate tectonics: the slab drives the flow in the glucose syrup and is resisted by the viscous dissipation in the glucose syrup and slab. It simply reads  $F_{sp} + F_{rp} = F_v + F_b$ , where  $F_{sp}$  is the slab pull force, with  $F_{sp} = (\rho_l - \rho_m)gWz_s\frac{H}{\sin\alpha}$ , where  $g$  is the gravitational acceleration,  $H$  and  $W$  the thickness and width of the slab,  $z_s$  the depth of the leading edge of the slab ( $z_s = D$  in steady state, where  $D$  is the thickness of the glucose syrup layer), and  $\alpha$  the dip of the slab.  $F_{rp} = (\rho_l - \rho_m)g\frac{H^2}{2}$  is the ridge push force, which in the *free* mode is negligible with respect to the slab pull force [22]. In the *fixed* subduction mode, the situation differs because of the no motion boundary condition. This kinematic (as opposed to dynamic) condition implies that  $F_{rp}$  constantly adjusts to balance the trenchward force that applies to the plate. That force is the opposite of the integral of the trench perpendicular component of the horizontal shear stresses underneath the lithosphere. These stresses result from the underlying viscous flow in the syrup, ultimately excited by the subduction of the slab. Paradoxically in that mode, the sign of  $F_{rp}$  implies that, as opposed to the situation on Earth, it is a resisting force.

$F_b$  is the bending force of the silicone slab. Funiciello et al. [27] computed the total value of  $F_b$  by integrating its local values along the bent lithosphere, such that  $F_b = \int_i \frac{2}{3}W\eta_l v_{sub}(H_i/r_i)^3 di$ , where  $H_i$  is the varying thickness of the slab alongside the slab length and  $r_i$  is the varying radius of curvature.  $\eta_l$  is the dynamic viscosity of the silicone putty and  $v_{sub}$  is the subduction velocity. The viscous dissipation due to slab bending in our models (10 to 30% [27]) is possibly slightly overestimated compared to that of the Earth. First, it is counted twice because the plate bends at the surface, but also at the bottom of the tank, where the slab retrieves a flat, horizontal geometry. In addition, because our slab to mantle viscosity ratios, when scaled to the Earth, are in the high end of the inferred range of values [27,32,30], the bending force may be high. In real Earth, it is now thought that the bending dissipates less than  $\sim 25\%$  of the energy [29], and even more likely between 5 and 20% [33].

Last, the viscous force  $F_v$  that stirs the glucose syrup is more difficult to assess; there is no proper analytical solution besides scaling  $F_v$  with  $\eta_m v$  (where  $v$  is the rate at which the slab rolls back). Indeed, this is particularly unfortunate because that viscous flow is responsible for the long wavelength dynamic distortion of the surface.

142 Before going further, a few limitations that are intrinsic to our models should  
 143 be outlined. First of all, the seldom discussed surface tension [34,35] affects  
 144 the dynamics of our experiments. In a sense, surface tension can conversely  
 145 be regarded as fortunate, because it coincidentally holds at the surface the  
 146 silicone plates, whose buoyancies fall within the desired range of exploration,  
 147 and let them sink beyond. However this is not an Earth-like property and  
 148 as such it may alter the interpretation of subduction dynamics. In addition,  
 149 the paint layer may also modify the surface tension of the fluid with respect  
 150 to the experiments that are exempt of paint. The effect of surface tension is  
 151 critical only when the slab buoyancy forces are low enough to be comparable  
 152 to that of surface tension. It could explain the non-linear behaviour of some  
 153 analogue models. For instance, in the experiments of Schellart [23], subduction  
 154 kinematics do not scale linearly with slab buoyancy, that is presumably the  
 155 only varying parameter of the experimental serie. However, such non linearities  
 156 are not striking in the experiments of Funiciello et al. [22]: during the early  
 157 stages of subduction, trench retreat rates seemingly increase almost linearly  
 158 with the slab pull force. Therefore, we assume that the role of surface tension,  
 159 although non negligible [35], doesn't significantly bias our results, but should  
 160 be carefully considered when full parametric studies are carried out.

161 Second, our models have no overriding plates. In precursory models, [36] suc-  
 162 cessfully overcame this issue by adding a viscous upper plate and measuring  
 163 the elevation changes throughout the experiment. This was suited for their  
 164 applied experiments, but added some noise to the results. Here instead, as in  
 165 the seminal experiments of subduction zones [22–24], we simplify the models  
 166 in order to extract the quintessential processes that shape the surface of the  
 167 Earth around subduction zones, but also to evaluate the feasibility of such  
 168 technique from a general standpoint. We are well aware that introducing up-  
 169 per plate changes the subduction dynamics [17,37,38], but a full parametric  
 170 study, that would explore a variety of boundary conditions (including upper  
 171 plates) is beyond the scope of this paper.

172 Third, the tank is not infinite, which often appears satisfying enough for the  
 173 study of subduction dynamics in general [22–24]. However, given that the very  
 174 distribution of the stresses within the flowing glucose syrup controls the to-  
 175 pography, its perturbation by the non-infinity of the tank plays a role. This  
 176 imposed condition nevertheless partly compares to real Earth, wherein slabs  
 177 neither sink into an infinite mantle nor evolve within a domain bounded by  
 178 undeformable, finite boundaries. This intermediate situation is often mislead-  
 179 ing when comparing real Earth subduction dynamics to simplified models that  
 180 display framed isolated systems.

### 181 3 Results

182 All our models follow comparable evolutions. Once steady state is reached, the  
 183 slab is folded twice, at the surface and at the bottom of the tank, where it lit-  
 184 erally unfolds. Subduction freely occurs: it is driven by the sole slab buoyancy  
 185 and resisted by the viscous flow in the glucose syrup. The slab enters a classic  
 186 rollback subduction mode. The trench therefore retreats while the slab sweeps  
 187 back into the glucose syrup, which in turn is displaced from the foreside to  
 188 the backside of the model thanks to a combination of toroidal and poloidal  
 189 flows [39,40,28] (fig. 2). When it enters the *free* subduction mode, the plate  
 190 moves trenchward, therefore reducing the rates of slab rollback ( $\sim 12\%$  for  
 191 model 1 for instance). The slab consequently becomes steeper. The dynamics  
 192 of subduction, *i.e.* the motion of the slab and the viscous flow in the glucose  
 193 syrup, excited by the very motion of the slab, alter the static force balance  
 194 and reshape the surface of the Earth. Our models allow to unravel the various  
 195 components.

#### 196 3.1 *Departure from isostasy as an indicator of the force balance in the system*

197 The depth  $h$  of the silicone layer relative to the glucose syrup is in principle,  
 198 in isotatic conditions, determined by the buoyancy of the layer, such that  $h =$   
 199  $\int_H \frac{\rho_l - \rho_m}{\rho_m} dz$ , where  $\rho_m$  and  $\rho_l$  are the densities of the glucose syrup and of the  
 200 silicone putty,  $H$  being the thickness of the silicone layer. Indeed, unsubducted  
 201 portions of the slab lay at greater depths than the adjacent glucose syrup. This  
 202 component dominates at the large scale and explains the first order observation  
 203 of the topography (figs. 2, 3 and 4). (Note that, unlike the Earth's lithosphere,  
 204 the silicone layer is not bounded by neighboring plates and therefore elevation  
 205 decreases stepwise from the adjacent glucose syrup. This discontinuity would  
 206 cause the silicone plate to subduct if surface tension was not high enough  
 207 to prevent this from happening, as illustrated by the meniscuses that make  
 208 the transition from the elevation of the glucose syrup to that of the silicone  
 209 plate, fig. 4b). Note that this it is not surface tension that plays this role on  
 210 Earth but the fact that oceanic plates are not in isolation from one another.  
 211 It is simply the lateral continuity of the lithospheres that prevents the lighter  
 212 underlying mantle from welling above the plates.

213 A closer examination of the topography reveals that it departs from isostasy  
 214 at different spatial scales, that are due to the dynamic evolution of the system.  
 215 The viscous dissipation of the energy modifies the static equilibrium. It bends  
 216 the silicone plate, which produces some relief, and stirs the glucose syrup,  
 217 which also deforms the surface. In the glucose syrup, the viscous dissipation  
 218 can be separated into the poloidal (in the vertical plane) and toroidal (in



the horizontal plane) components. The retrograde motion of the slab into the syrup modifies the horizontal stress field and its descent into the fluid induces the vertical one. The convolution of these dynamic processes causes, across subduction zones on Earth, a variety of features that can be deciphered thanks to our integrative experiments.

### 3.2 Trench

The most obvious feature that departs from the static topography is naturally the trench (figs. 3, 4 and 5). Trench depths reach  $\sim 3$ -4 mm and do not vary significantly from the *fixed* mode subduction mode to the *free* mode (fig. 4a). Along-strike (parallel to the trench), the trench is almost uniformly deep; only at very short distances (less than a fifth of the slab width) from the slab edges does it shallow (fig. 3); this highlights that this structure is essentially two-dimensional, across strike. In real Earth, the depth of the trench is determined by the shear coupling between the upper and lower plates on the interplate fault [4,41]. Our model is purely viscous and there is therefore no proper subduction fault that could be defined by a yield stress. Instead, the depression results from the competition between the buoyancy stresses in the glucose syrup, that tend to restore uniformity, and the shear stresses exerted by the subducting slab that impose the downward flow of the glucose syrup. The main difference is that the flow in the wedge has a boundary condition that is more kinematic, imposed by the subduction rate, than dynamic, *i.e.* defined by a shear stress. The glucose syrup at the interface therefore must flow along with the subducting plate. Note that part of the apparent trench in our models is a meniscus from surface tension (see above). Scaled to the Earth, predicted trench depths amount to 20-25 km, which seems impressively unrealistic, but is in fact only approximately two to three times larger than actual trenches (after sediments are stripped off).

### 3.3 Viscous bulge

Adjacent to the trench is the forebulge on the silicone plate (figs. 3, 4 and 5). Bulges in our experiments result from the viscous flexure of the silicone plate. Their 0.15 to 0.2 mm high,  $75 \pm 25$  mm wide, elongate bodies lie parallel to the trench, at a distance that varies of  $\sim 50$  mm in the *free* mode and  $\sim 44$  mm in the *fixed* mode. This difference arises from the fact that slabs are steeper in the *free* mode, a fact that doesn't affect the elevation of the bulge that remains comparable in both cases. This may be explained by the fact that subduction rates play a fundamental role. Indeed, if the rate of trench retreat is lower of 12% in the *free* mode, the subduction rate remains comparable.

Contrarily to the trench, the bulge reaches its maximum elevation near the edges of the plate, and not in the center (figs. 3 and 5). This observation is somewhat surprising given the fact that the flexure of a viscous plate is *a priori* a two-dimensional problem and as such, there is no intrinsic reason for the bulge to have its elevation vary along-strike. It results from the interaction with the suction component, which is larger in the center of the slab than at the edges (see section 3.5).

In theory, the viscous flexure of the plate is periodic, and the magnitude of the oscillation diminishes exponentially towards the foreside [42,43]. The forebulge should therefore be followed by a deflection, but its magnitude is too small to be detected in our experiment. Not surprisingly, the plate flexure follows the universal deflection profile [42]. Scaled to the Earth, the modeled bulges are 1.0 to 1.3 km high and  $500 \pm 175$  km large. The distance between the maximum elevation of the bulge and the trench varies from  $\sim 335$  km to  $\sim 300$  km, depending on the mode. Our models here reemphasize the possibility that the observed outer rises are due to the viscous nature of the lithosphere [43,41].

### 3.4 Overpressure

The depth of the silicone plate is systematically offset by  $\sim 100 \mu m$ , with respect to the theoretical, isostatic depth, when the subduction occurs in a *fixed* mode, and is 30% smaller on average in the *free* subduction mode (fig. 4a). This is a first order response of the topography to the underlying force balance, in the glucose syrup. The retrograde motion of the slab compresses the glucose syrup in the foreside and conversely, extends it in the backside. The situation is somewhat similar to that of a channel flow between the slab itself and the end wall of the tank, such that  $\frac{dp}{dy} = 12\eta_m \frac{\bar{v}}{L^2}$ , where  $\frac{dp}{dy}$  is the pressure gradient in the channel parallel to the slab,  $\eta_m$  is the dynamic viscosity of the glucose syrup,  $\bar{v}$  is the mean velocity in the channel, and  $L$  is the width of the channel. Mass conservation imposes that  $\bar{v}L = u\frac{W}{2}$ , where  $u$  is the horizontal velocity of the slab and  $\frac{W}{2}$  is the half width of the slab. The mean pressure in the channel is  $\bar{p} = \frac{3}{2}\eta_m \frac{uW^2}{L^3}$ . That dynamic pressure is compensated by a mean deflection of the surface that reads

$$\bar{\delta}_z = \frac{3\eta_m}{2\rho_m g} \frac{uW^2}{L^3}. \quad (1)$$

$u$  is counted negative on the backside and positive on the foreside, therefore the two effects amplify the total elevation offset between the front and back of the slab, which therefore approximately equals  $2\bar{\delta}_z$  (if the slab plunges into the syrup at an equal distance from each end of the tank). It gives a order of magnitude for  $2\bar{\delta}_z$  of 5 to  $100 \mu m$  depending on the experimental values. The

293 scaled magnitude of the offset is thus 35 to 700 m, depending on the forces  
 294 at play and on the subduction mode. These results are in the lower bound  
 295 of our observations which reveals that this approximation may not be robust  
 296 enough to be further developed. In particular, because the finite geometry of  
 297 the tank in which the channel is embedded is not accounted for, the channel  
 298 flow analogy does not permit to explain the uplifted topography outside the  
 299 channel proper, on the glucose syrup adjacent to the slab. It is nevertheless  
 300 obviously related to the same overpressure induced by the retrograde motion  
 301 of the slab (fig. 1). Indeed in our models, the overpressure effect occupies the  
 302 entire surface of the tank. It induces an overall tilt of the surface and is not  
 303 restricted to the surface of the plate. This figure only partly compares to real  
 304 Earth where plates do not subduct in bounded domains (but neither sink in  
 305 an infinite mantle).

306 Because in the *free* subduction mode, part of the pressure is released when  
 307 the slab is free to move trenchward (*free subduction*), the elevation offset is  
 308 lower than the offset in the *fixed* mode (trench migration rates, and therefore  
 309 pressure, are lower); it then amounts to  $\sim 500$  m on average. This can per-  
 310 haps be more clearly conceived by stating this in a more rigorous way, that  
 311 reverses causes and consequences: the very reason why trenches roll back at  
 312 lower rates in the *free* subduction mode than in the *fixed* mode is indeed the  
 313 pressure drop between the fore and backsides of the slab. Overpressure on the  
 314 foreside, underpressure on the backside partly work to maintain the slab at a  
 315 central location in the tank. In the particular case where the pressure gradient  
 316 balances the slab normal component of the slab pull force, no roll back occurs  
 317 [20]; this situation is never met in our models.

### 318 3.5 Suction

319 At second glance, second order deflections burst out: the topography shows  
 320 a large scale deflection centered on the trench (figs. 2 and 3), the wavelength  
 321 of which is much larger than that of the trench. This is the dynamic re-  
 322 sponse of the topography to the vertical motion of the slab, a largely debated  
 323 feature on Earth's subduction zones [3–5,44,18,45]. It is often referred to as  
 324 *dynamic topography*, despite the fact that the other topographic features, be-  
 325 sides isostasy, are also *dynamic* in essence. The descent of the slab induces  
 326 stresses that are compensated by a vertical deflection of the topography  $\delta_z$ ,  
 327 so that  $\delta_z = \sigma_{zz}/\rho_m g$ , where  $\sigma_{zz}$  is the vertical stress due to the poloidal flow  
 328 in the glucose syrup. It forms a depression that is visible in both the foreside  
 329 and backside of the trench (figs 3 and 4). In the *fixed* subduction mode, the  
 330 measured magnitude of the deflection in our experiments is around  $75 \pm 50$   
 331  $\mu\text{m}$  at a distance  $W/2$  (half width of the slab) from the trench, depending on  
 332 the forces in the presence and setting. This corresponds to  $500 \pm 330$  m when

333 scaled to the Earth. The deflection reaches its largest magnitude in the center,  
 334 above the slab, and vanishes laterally, both along- and across-strike. The lat-  
 335 eral extent of the anomaly is theoretically infinite in a linear viscous flow but  
 336 visual inspection of our experiments reveal that the magnitude of the dynamic  
 337 deflection becomes negligible at an approximate distance  $W$  from the trench.  
 338 On the foreside, the dynamic deflection combines with the short-wavelength,  
 339 large-magnitude features that are the trench itself and the forebulge (fig. 5).  
 340 Note that it shall not be confused with the secondary harmonic oscillation  
 341 of the viscous flexure, because the magnitude is incompatible. Typically, the  
 342 universal deflection curve for a viscous bulging gives a ratio between the mag-  
 343 nitudes of the forebulge and of the depression that follows of about 1/100 [43]  
 344 after [42], which is considerably less than the 20 to 30% given by the ratio  
 345 between the elevation of the forebulge and the deflection.

346 *Free* subduction mode (fig. 3b) also naturally produces suction, but *fixed* sub-  
 347 duction systems display wider and deeper dynamic deflections than *free* mode  
 348 ones by about 30%. The shape of the deflection relates to the distribution of  
 349 the mass anomalies at depth and therefore to the shape of the slab in our  
 350 experiments. Because in the *free* subduction mode, slabs are steeper [22], the  
 351 mass excess lays, on a map view, closer to the trench. This makes the wave-  
 352 length of the dynamic deflection shorter. In addition, in the *free* subduction  
 353 mode, the total mass is smaller because the slab is steeper, and therefore  
 354 shorter (total mass varies like  $D \sin \alpha$ , where  $\alpha$  is the slab dip angle). In our  
 355 experiments, slab dip increases from  $\sim 60^\circ$  to  $\sim 80^\circ$  between the *fixed* and  
 356 *free* modes (Ben, can you put in the correct values?). This decreases the  
 357 total mass anomaly by  $\sim 15\%$ , the slab pull by a similar amount and, if the  
 358 geometry remained the same, the magnitude of the dynamic deflection too.  
 359 Because the shape of the slab also changes in the experiment, the modification  
 360 is not linear, and the deflection in the *free* mode is also sharper.

361 Dynamic deflections are time-dependent and the successive scans that we per-  
 362 formed during the transition from a *fixed* subduction mode to a *free* subduc-  
 363 tion mode are also available. Similarly, we performed some experiments during  
 364 which the buoyancy of the slab that enters the subduction varies. This also  
 365 induces transient behaviors. Typically, the slab is made up of a succession of  
 366 segments of low and high buoyancies (models 12 and 13, see parameters in  
 367 Supplementary material 1). We monitored the transient topographic response  
 368 to the dynamics of subduction through time. As expected, low buoyancy seg-  
 369 ments are accompanied by smaller dynamic deflections than high buoyancy  
 370 ones, and reciprocally. These transient regimes shall be compared to the geo-  
 371 logical record around subduction zones. But this step shall not be envisioned  
 372 before steady regimes are understood and identified on Earth.

## 373 4 Comparison to the figure of the Earth

374 Our simple setup resembles the Earth to some extent. It therefore permits to  
 375 quantify the relative importance of each of the contributors that shape the  
 376 figure of the Earth around subduction zones. In fact, a variety of models was  
 377 formerly designed at the scale of the subduction zone in order to explore the  
 378 relationships between the slab and dynamic topography. Few of them how-  
 379 ever challenge the technical issue of incorporating mobile trenches, although  
 380 it is known to affect the response of the surface topography [20]. Because  
 381 they generally aim at quantifying dynamic topography of the overriding plate  
 382 and neglect the subducting plate, most models implicitly ignore the fact that  
 383 they constantly modify artificially the stress balance in order to maintain a  
 384 no rollback condition. The consequences of this choice are not trivial : trench  
 385 motion controls the flow around subduction zones -and therefore the stress  
 386 regime- to a degree that may have a profound impact on the flow pattern in  
 387 the wedge [46]. Imposing trench fixity barely resembles Earth-like conditions  
 388 and in our models, we adopt two alternative settings. The *fixed* mode con-  
 389 sideres that the stresses that resist the displacement of the subducting plate  
 390 are always large enough to oppose any motion. In that case, trench migration  
 391 rates equal subduction rates. This example is relevant to the Earth in many  
 392 instances. For instance, the small-scale subduction zones that are embedded  
 393 into bigger systems (like the fast Hellenic subduction zone within the slow  
 394 Africa-Eurasia convergent system, or the East Scotia subduction zone within  
 395 the South Atlantic). The *free* subduction mode instead assumes that plate  
 396 motion is dictated by the force balance at the subduction zone itself. This  
 397 mode could correspond to any larger subduction system (for instance, Nazca-  
 398 South America) under the heavy assumption that the upper plate doesn't play  
 399 a crucial role in the force balance. In our experiments, *fixed* subduction sys-  
 400 tems display wider and deeper dynamic deflections than *free* mode ones. Such  
 401 result is beyond what could be inferred by a comparison between the Nazca  
 402 and Hellenic subduction zones; in that sense, analogue models are helpful to  
 403 overcome observational issues.

404 The forebulge is a commonly described feature and it is no surprise that it is  
 405 well reproduced by our models. As opposed to the more popular elastic bulge  
 406 [2,42,47], our models predict that outer rises emerge from the flexure of viscous  
 407 slabs. This idea is however not new: similar geometries have been reproduced  
 408 with either viscous or elastic rheologies [43], or even with composite rheologies  
 409 [48,49]. However, given the fact that subducting slabs are dominantly treated  
 410 with viscous rheologies in the litterature, it is good to recall that outer rises  
 411 may be caused by a process that consistently obeys the same rules. Our models,  
 412 as many others, is capable of predicting the variable geometry of outer rises  
 413 to a degree that exceeds observations. In fact, flexure models became popular  
 414 although they mostly apply to the Aleutian, Kuril, Bonin, and Mariana, *i.e.*

415 a selection of well-behaved subduction zones that were chosen as early as the  
416 70's to illustrate the theory [2]. Herein we wish to emphasize that, more than  
417 the forebulge, that almost only depends on the rheology of the subducting  
418 plate, or even the trench, it is the surface expression of the underlying viscous  
419 flow that those experiments reveal with a new light.

420 Interestingly enough, the suction deflection appears on both the back and  
421 fore sides of the trench. Global models that are buoyancy driven [7–9,16] also  
422 show this, because slabs are the prominent features in the Earth's mantle. But  
423 again, models that are designed to investigate the relationships between the  
424 subducting slab and the dynamic deflection of the upper plate do not consider  
425 the dynamic topography on subducting plates but only focus on upper plates.  
426 Our models show that subducting plates (foreside of our models) can also be  
427 deflected downward by the suction effect of the underlying mantle flow, by  
428 a comparable amount. The signal is not straightforward though, because al-  
429 though it is of opposed sign, this depression competes with the uplift due to  
430 the overpressure underneath the foreside of the slab. Therefore, the net result  
431 is a global uplift of the foreside, only modulated by the shorter wavelength  
432 suction topography (fig. 5). The overpressure effect is expected to uplift the  
433 subducting plate at a regional scale by 100 to 600 m. Only at short distance  
434 from the trench, this effect should be counterbalanced by the opposite effect  
435 of the suction.

436  
437 In real Earth, the signal is often too blurred to detect the competition be-  
438 tween the two processes. It is nevertheless true that the bathymetry, to the  
439 East of the East Scotia subduction zone is  $\sim 5000$  m deep (fig. 6a), almost  
440 1000 m deeper than the surrounding portions of the Atlantic plate of similar  
441 age. The Tonga and Kermadec subduction zones (considered as two different  
442 subduction zones separated by a slab tear from one another at the junction  
443 with the Louisville ridge) display comparable relief: the seafloor to the East of  
444 the Tonga trench (fig. 6b) lies at  $\sim 6000$  m, and to the East of the Kermadec  
445 trench at 5800 m (fig. 6b). In all three cases, the seafloor lies 500 to 1000 m  
446 lower (avoiding seamounts) than the surrounding portions of the oceanic plate  
447 of similar age. The distance at which the depression becomes insignificant is  
448 comparable to the width of the trench, which is remarkably corroborating the  
449 suction effect observed in our experiments. In addition, these depressed areas  
450 are possibly embedded in wider zones that are themselves possibly at higher  
451 elevations than more distal portions of seafloor of similar age. The ages of the  
452 foresides of the East Scotia Sea is 30 to 50 Ma, that of Tonga is 90 to 100  
453 Ma, and that of Kermadec is 90 to 120 Ma. The expected depth, compared  
454 to the mean depths on Earth [50] are respectively  $4800 \pm 400$  m,  $5400 \pm 400$  m,  
455 and  $5500 \pm 400$  m. The seafloor, in all three cases is 200 to 600 m shallower  
456 than the mean values for the Earth, which is in turn comparable to the pre-  
457 diction of the overpressure effect from our experiments (the observed offset is

458  $\bar{\delta}_z$ , not  $2\bar{\delta}_z$  because only the overpressure on the foreside is measured). Last,  
 459 the inferred suction effect in the Tonga subduction zone is more pronounced,  
 460 by  $\sim 200$  m, than in the adjacent Kermadec subduction zone. The subducting  
 461 plate in the Tonga and Kermadec subduction zones is presumably comparable  
 462 for it has the same nature. The only *a priori* differences between the two are  
 463 (i) a slightly older subducting slab in the South (Kermadec) than in the North  
 464 (Tonga), which should *a contrario* enhance the suction effect because of the  
 465 higher negative buoyancy, and (ii) a much faster slab rollback in the North  
 466 than in the South. The latter effect efficiently shapes the bathymetry: while  
 467 the Kermadec trench remains approximately stationary, the Tonga trench is  
 468 the fastest retreating trench on Earth, at about 160 mm/yr. This observation  
 469 supports our model results, which suggest that rollback fosters dynamic to-  
 470 pography: dynamic deflections of the topography in the *free* subduction mode  
 471 are lower by  $\sim 30\%$  than in the *fixed* mode. Similar conclusions were reached  
 472 by Russo and Silver [51], who envisioned the possibility that the shallow Nazca  
 473 plate could be uplifted by the underlying dynamic overpressure. These obser-  
 474 vations certainly plead for the existence of dynamic deflection of the foreside  
 475 of the subduction zones too, but making the link between the two requires a  
 476 thorough analysis of the bathymetry and gravity.

477 On the backside however, the effects of dynamic pressure and suction have the  
 478 same polarity; the cumulated depression predicted by our models thus amounts  
 479 to  $1200 \pm 500$  m. At large distances from the trench, only the underpressure  
 480 effect remains significant, with a downlift of 100 to 600 m. Many examples in  
 481 continental domains [12–15, 36, 52, 53] display geological signatures that confirm  
 482 that upper plates are deflected by comparable magnitudes and wavelengths.  
 483 The long wavelengths of the afore cited examples highlight the importance  
 484 of the underpressure effect in continental inundation more than that of the  
 485 suction effect.

486 In oceanic domains, the underpressure effect on the backside is more difficult  
 487 to track on Earth because few subduction zones display clear enough settings.  
 488 The few candidates are the Philippine plate (40–50 Ma) and the South Fidji  
 489 basin (20–30 Ma), that respectively lay at  $\sim 5900$  m and  $\sim 4500$  m. Their depths  
 490 are thus respectively  $\sim 1000$  m and  $\sim 300$  m deeper than the mean average  
 491 depth for seafloor of similar ages [50], which again pleads for a deflection  
 492 that is at least compatible with our model results. The suction effect on the  
 493 backside is more clearly expressed in oceanic domains. At short distances from  
 494 its trench, the 8000 m deep Weber trough in the Banda Sea (fig. 7a) represents,  
 495 in spite of its extremely young age ( $< 3$  Myrs), the deepest seafloor on Earth  
 496 besides trenches at present-day. It is more than 5000 m deeper than the mean  
 497 depth of oceanic units of similar age. Similarly, the residual topography of the  
 498 East Scotia sea back arc basin (fig. 7, modified after [5]) is deflected towards  
 499 its center by up to 1500 m at a short distance from the trench. Both examples  
 500 confirm that the suction effect of the underlying subducting slabs on Earth

501 on upper plates is extremely efficient, in agreement with our models.

502 The topography in our models emerges from the stress balance and our scan-  
503 ning device allows for a three-dimensional illustration of it. Four dimensional if  
504 one accounts for its time evolution. The results often go beyond observational  
505 possibilities, and as such they are potentially useful. These tests revealed that  
506 analogue models are capable of predicting the evolution of the topography  
507 around subduction zones. Specifically, they meet the following criteria: they  
508 have free surfaces, they are three dimensional, subduction process is purely  
509 dynamic (no kinematic boundary condition), rollback freely occurs. This del-  
510 icate blend of conditions that are each individually still challenging to model  
511 numerically makes our analogue models of use for the analysis and compre-  
512 hension of the dynamics of relief. Last, these models give a simple view of the  
513 three dimensional nature of the topography around subduction zones by com-  
514 bining most processes that deform the surface of the Earth, but nevertheless  
515 leave the possibility to extract each component independently, something that  
516 is rendered difficult in real Earth, because of the uncertainty in the structure  
517 of the lithosphere.



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Parameters			Nature	Reference model
$g$	Gravitational acceleration	$m/s^2$	9.81	9.81
<i>Length</i>				
$W$	Subducting plate width	$m$	990000	0.15
$H$	Subducting plate thickness		100000	0.0152
$D$	Upper mantle thickness		660000	0.10
	Scale factor for length		$L_{model}/L_{nature} = 1.52 \times 10^{-7}$	
<i>Buoyancy</i>				
$\rho_m - \rho_l$	Subducting oceanic plate	$kg/m^3$	-80	-91
			(80 Myr-old plate)	
	Scale factor for buoyancy		$\Delta\rho_{model}/\Delta\rho_{nature} \simeq 1$	
<i>Viscosity</i>				
$\eta_l$	Subducting oceanic plate	$Pas$	$1.4 \times 10^{24}$	$4.2 \times 10^5$
$\eta_m$	Upper mantle		$10^{20}$	30
	Scale factor for viscosity		$\eta_{model}/\eta_{nature} = 3 \times 10^{-19}$	
<i>Characteristic time</i>				
$t$	$t_{nature}/t_{model} = ((\Delta\rho g H)_{model}/(\Delta\rho g H)_{nature}) \times (\eta_{nature}/\eta_{model})$	$s$	$3.16 \times 10^{13}$ (1 Myr)	55
	Scale factor for time		$t_{model}/t_{nature} = 1.74 \times 10^{-12}$	

Table 1  
Scaling of the modeling parameters in nature and in the laboratory, for the reference model.

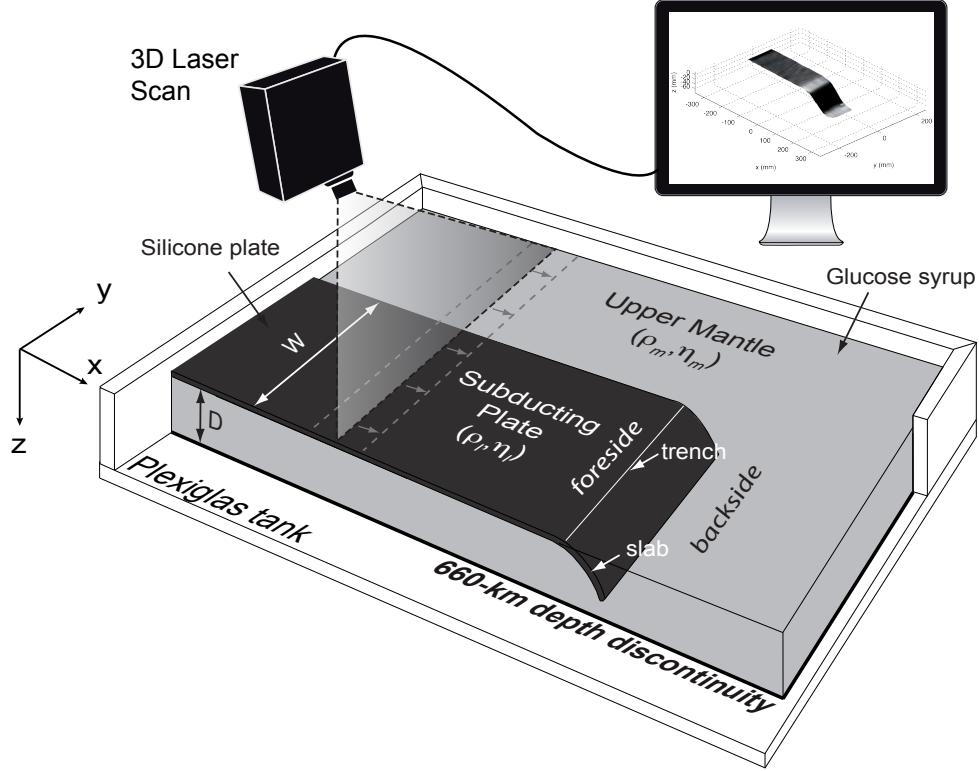


Fig. 1. Experimental setup. The subducting lithosphere is modeled by a silicone plate of density  $\rho_l$ , viscosity  $\eta_l$ , width  $W$ , thickness  $H$ . The mantle is simulated by means of glucose syrup of density  $\rho_m$ , viscosity  $\eta_m$  and thickness  $D$ . The plate is either *fixed*, *i.e.* the trailing edge is attached to the end of the tanks or *free*, *i.e.* the trailing edge freely moves. The surface topography in the experiments is monitored by a 3D laser scanner. The foreside corresponds to the region where the lithosphere has not yet been subducted and the backside is located above the sunken slab.

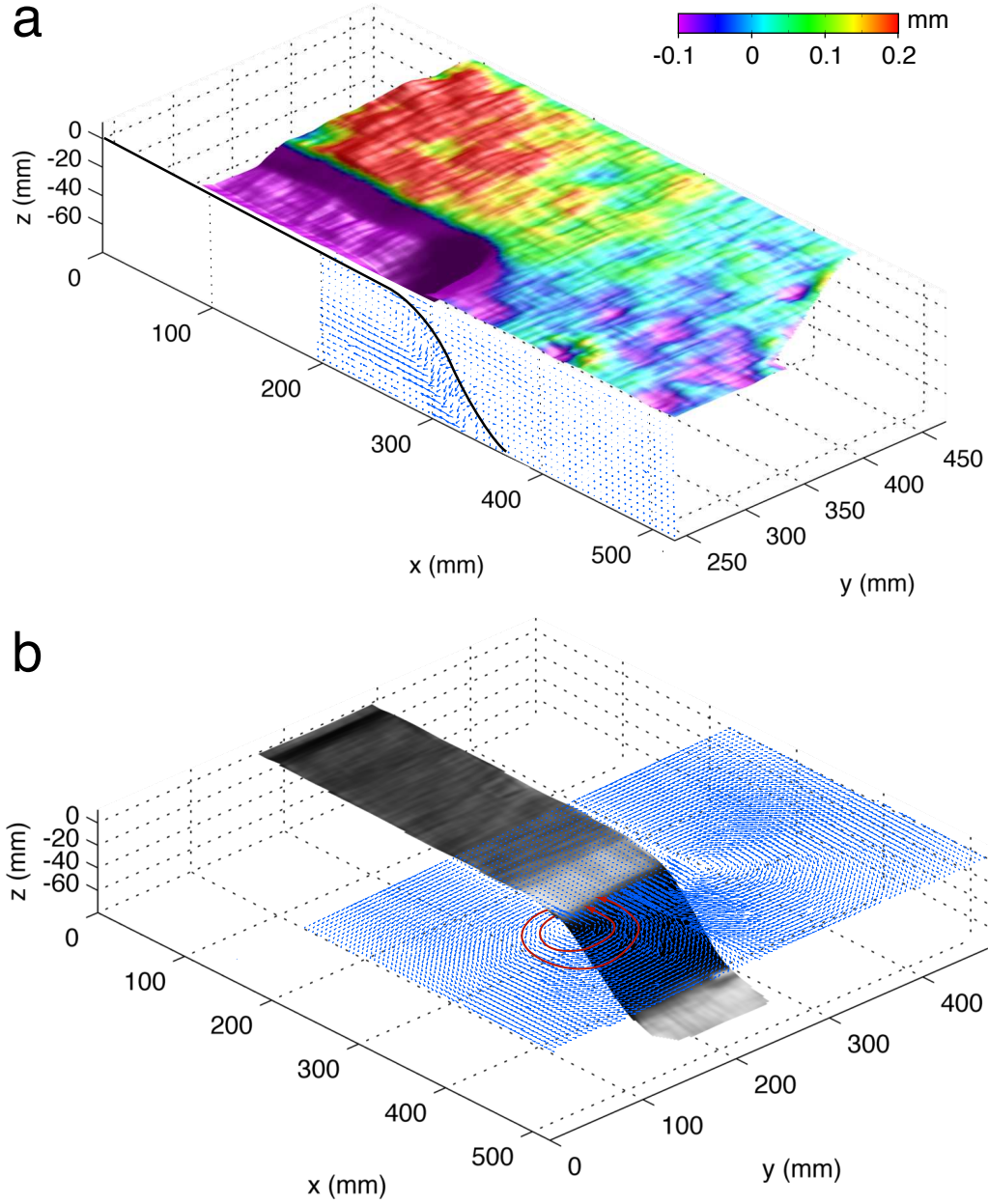


Fig. 2. (a) 3D view of the surface topography (color coded and magnified by a factor 10) cut along the plate centerline and velocity vectors (in blue) of the mantle flow in the vertical section ( $x$ - $z$ ) for our reference experiment with *fixed edge* conditions (model 1, see parameters in Table 1). (b) 3D view of the top of the slab shape (in black) and velocity vectors (in blue) of the mantle flow in the horizontal section ( $x$ - $y$ ) at the top of the mantle for the same model.

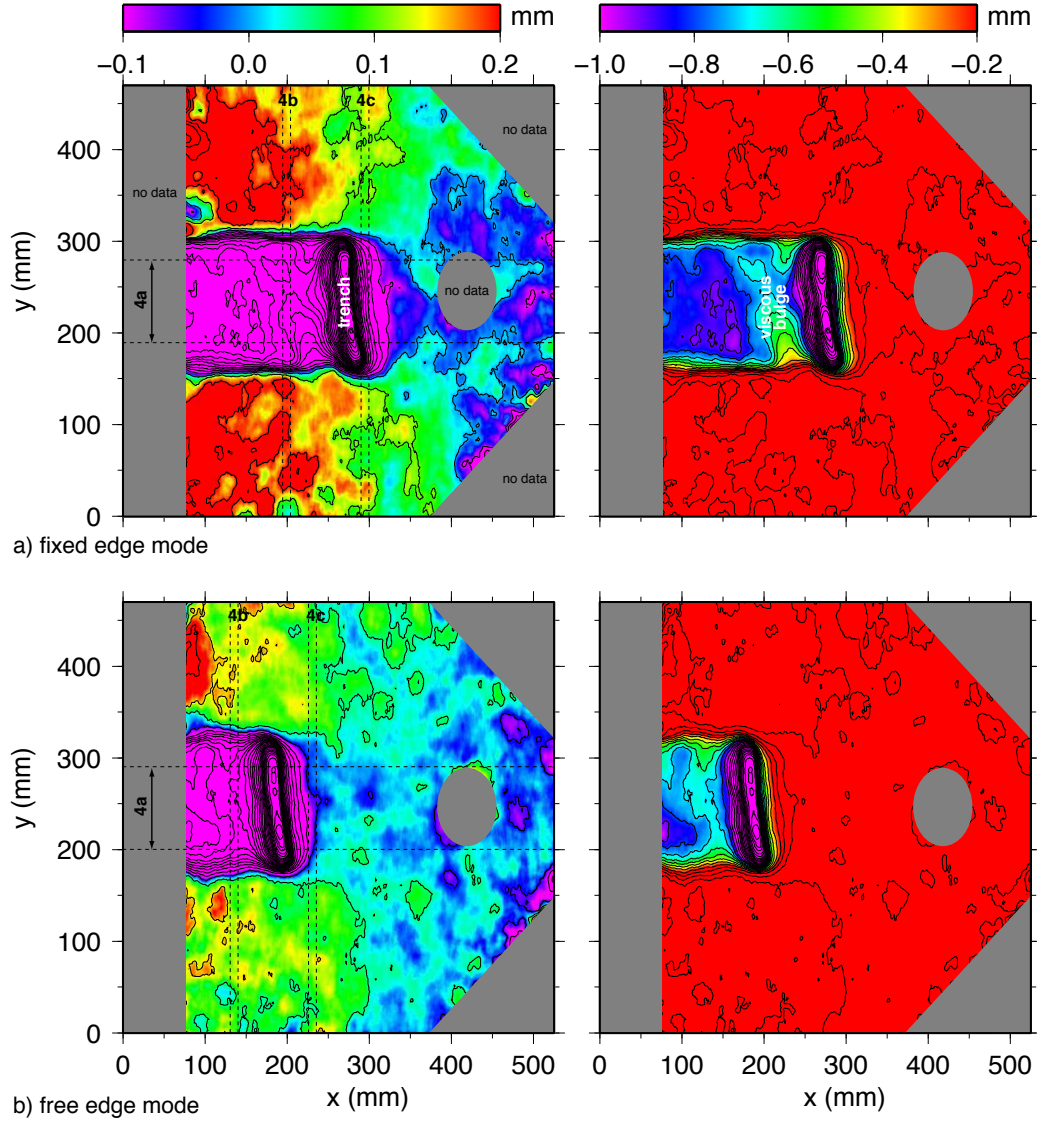


Fig. 3. Map view of the surface of model 1 in the *fixed* (a) and *free* (b) subduction modes. Right and left panels display the same maps but with different color palettes in order to respectively highlight the topography of the plate (right) and glucose syrup (left). The dotted lines show the location of the different swath profiles plotted in fig. 4. Areas with no topographic data are indicated in gray.



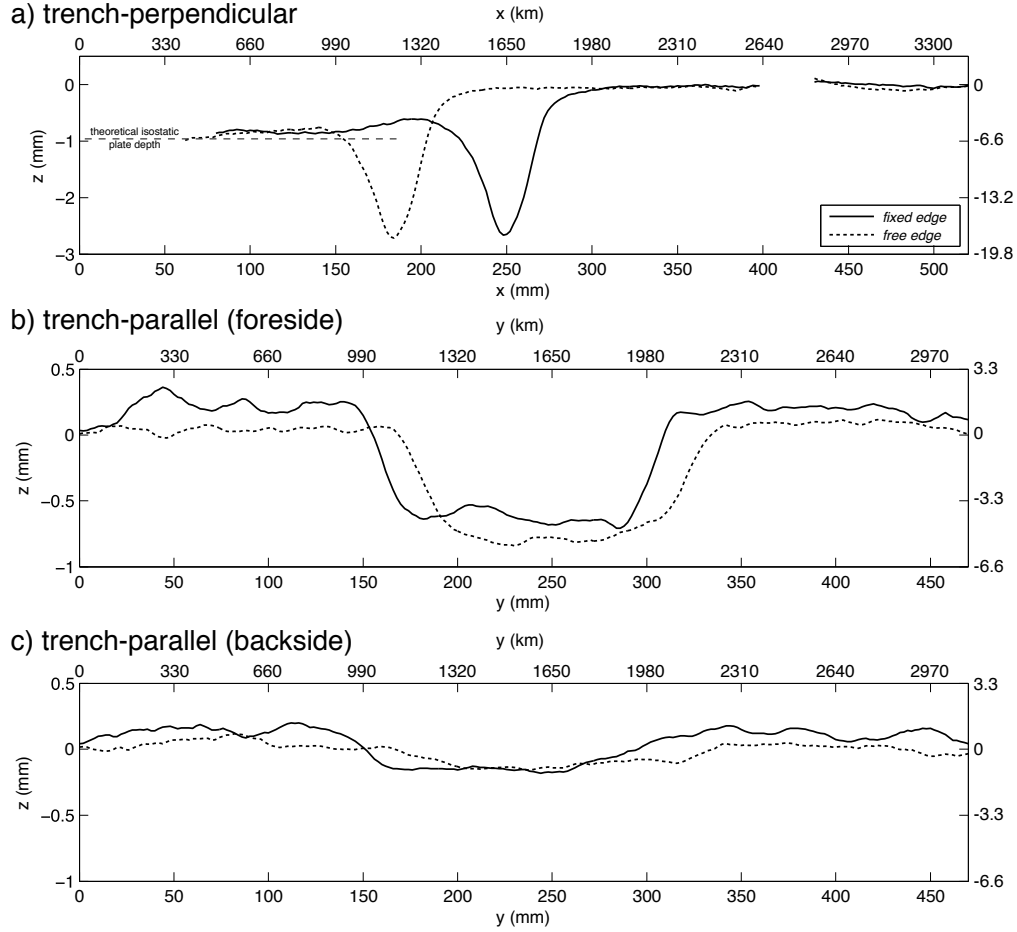


Fig. 4. Swath topographic profiles for model 1 in the *fixed* (solid line) and *free* (dotted line) subduction modes (a) in the trench-normal direction, averaged over a distance of 40 mm from the plate centerline, (b) in the trench-parallel direction in the foreside (50 mm from the trench), and (c) in the trench-parallel direction in the backside (50 mm from the trench). Note the different scales for fig. 4a and figs. 4b-c. See fig. 3 for sections location. The theoretical isostatic depth for the plate is indicated by a dashed line in the first panel.

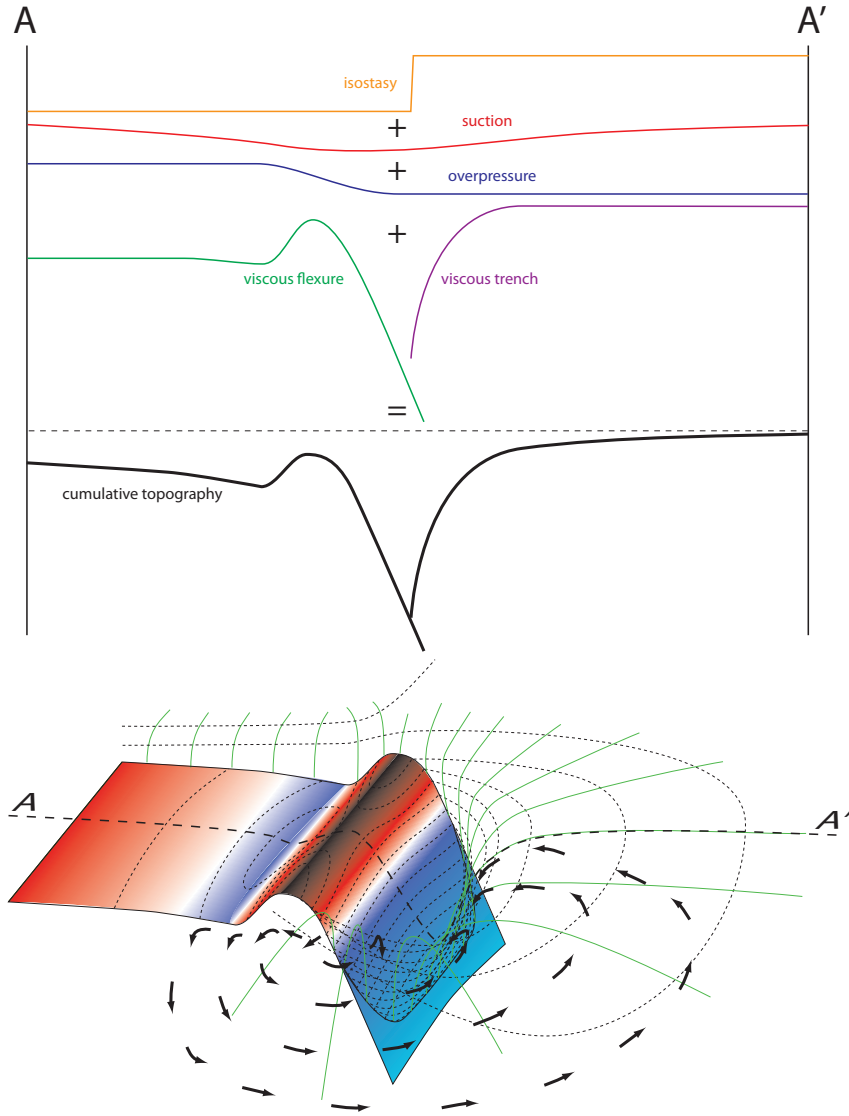


Fig. 5. Synthetic 3D sketch of the topography around a subduction zone (bottom) in the experiments (not to scale). Black dotted lines are isodepths curves, green curves follow the local maximum topographic gradients. Black arrows denote the flow pattern from below the slab on the fore side to above the slab on the backside. Top graph shows the isolated contributors along the central cross-section  $AA'$ .

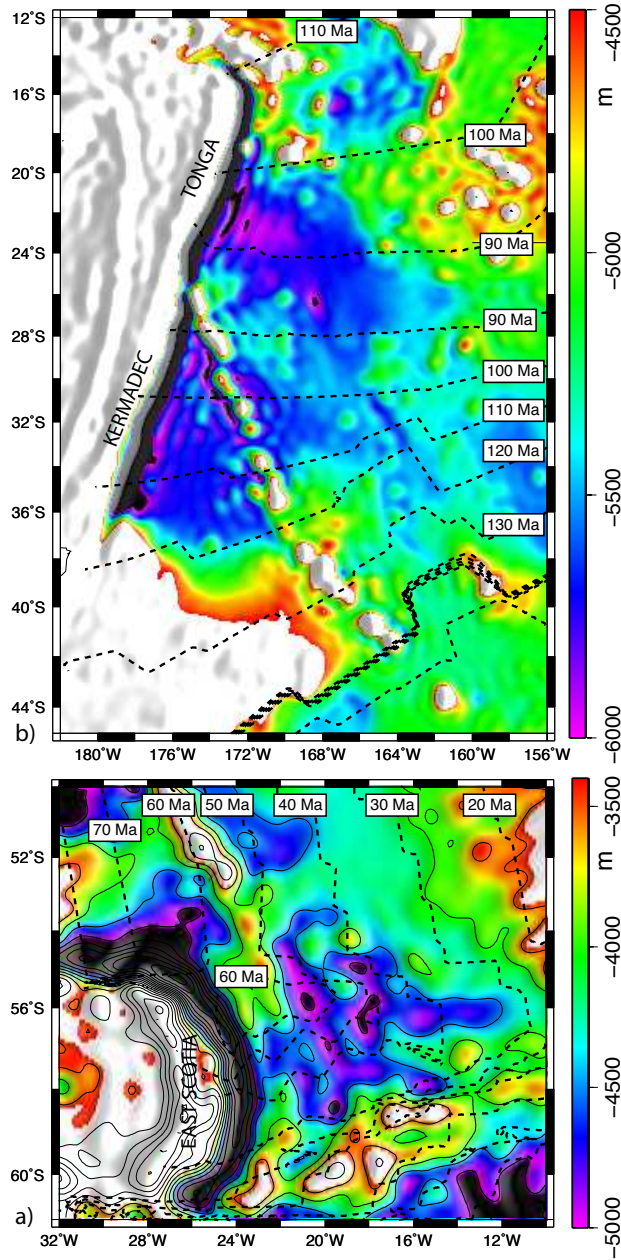


Fig. 6. Bathymetry on the foresides of the East Scotia (a) and Tonga and Kermadec (b) subduction zones. Wavelengths shorter than 100 km have been filtered out. Note the low lying areas on the foresides of each trench,  $\sim 5000$  m deep (East Scotia),  $\sim 6000$  m deep (Tonga) and  $\sim 5700$  m deep (Kermadec). In all three cases, they are 800 to 1000 m deeper than the adjacent seafloor of similar age. Seafloor age from [54].

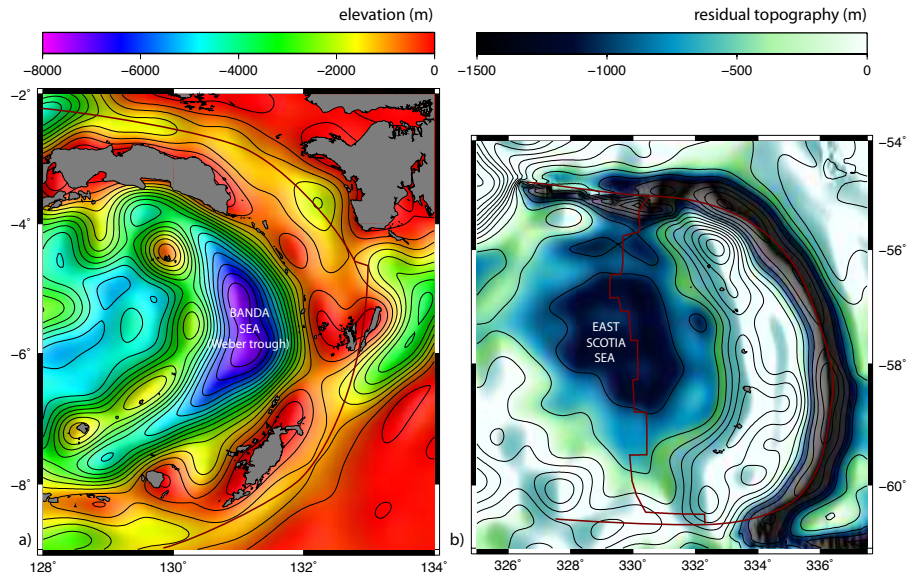


Fig. 7. Bathymetry on the backside of the Banda subduction zone (a) and residual bathymetry of the East Scotia subduction zone (b, modified after [5]). (Residual topography of the extremely young Banda back-arc basin was not computed (unavailable seafloor age grid) but is expected to be almost comparable to the residual topography). Wavelengths shorter than 100 km have been filtered out. Note the  $\sim 8000$  m deep Weber trough on the backside of Banda trench, and the  $\sim 1500$  m residual topography in the East Scotia back arc basin.

Supplementary material 1.

Experimental parameters. ( $W$ : plate width;  $H$ : plate thickness;  $D$ : mantle thickness  $\rho_l$ : plate density;  $\eta_l$ : plate viscosity;  $\rho_m$ : mantle density;  $\eta_m$ : mantle viscosity;  $\rho_{ll}$ : light plate density).

Model	$W$ <i>mm</i>	$H$ <i>mm</i>	$D$ <i>mm</i>	$\rho_l$ <i>kg/m<sup>3</sup></i>	$\eta_l$ <i>Pa s</i>	$\rho_m$ <i>kg/m<sup>3</sup></i>	$\eta_m$ <i>Pa s</i>	$\rho_{ll}$ <i>kg/m<sup>3</sup></i>	$\eta_l/\eta_m$	$\rho_l - \rho_m$ <i>kg/m<sup>3</sup></i>
1	150	15.2	100	1506	$4.2 \times 10^5$	1415	30	-	14000	91
2	200	13.7	100	1468	$3.0 \times 10^5$	1415	30	-	10000	53
3	150	12.5	100	1468	$3.0 \times 10^5$	1415	30	-	10000	53
4	200	13.0	100	1506	$4.2 \times 10^5$	1415	30	-	14000	91
5	200	15.5	100	1506	$4.2 \times 10^5$	1415	30	-	14000	91
6	150	13.7	100	1506	$4.2 \times 10^5$	1415	30	-	14000	91
7	145	15.5	100	1468	$3.0 \times 10^5$	1415	30	-	10000	53
8	150	15.0	97	1506	$4.2 \times 10^5$	1450	1000	-	420	56
9	200	15.0	100	1506	$4.2 \times 10^5$	1450	1000	-	420	56
10	200	12.8	98	1506	$4.2 \times 10^5$	1450	1000	-	420	56
11	150	13.0	95	1506	$4.2 \times 10^5$	1450	1000	-	420	56
12	150	12.0	100	1506	$4.2 \times 10^5$	1450	1000	1458	420	56
13	150	12.0	100	1506	$4.2 \times 10^5$	1450	1000	1458	420	56